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AUTHOR Cox, Ruth
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ABSTRACT

Designed to assist foreign language teachers to become more computer literate, this paper discusses five major types of educational software currently on the market: (1) drill and practice; (2) tutorials; (3) simulations; (4) computer games; and (5) problem solvers. Possible uses for each type of program are given; in addition, specific programs designed for foreign language instruction are provided. It is also suggested that foreign language teachers write their own tutorials using such authoring languages as SuperPILOT by Apple, which is based on PASCAL, or Language Study Center from Teach Yourself by Computer Software, which contains an easy to use mini-authoring language program that allows the teacher to write any number of personalized new lessons following a prescribed format. Finally, cost effectiveness factors to consider in the selection of foreign language software are presented: careful selection of hardware and software, a knowledge of the needs of a particular school, understanding a software's capabilities and classroom applicability, the number of students who will benefit from the program, and an individual teacher's skill in utilizing a particular type of software. A list of references completes the paper. (JB)

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Computers in the Foreign Language Classroom: Not Just Another "Fad or Frill"

by

Ruth Cox

MSERA 1985

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Computers in the Foreign Language Classroom: Not Just Another "Fad or Frill"

Many foreign language teachers who were born before 1965 and are, therefore, not children of the "computer age," are secretly hoping computers are just another "fad or frill" that will soon disappear to make more traditional teaching methods regain respect. Foreign language teachers, as well as their colleagues in the humanities, have tried to avoid computers "like the plague" (Hammerly, 1981). Some even attempt to rationalize fear of technology by claiming computers dehumanize the teaching process, rather than stress the importance of personal human interaction (Lindenau, 1984). Claims that by 1990 every school in the United States will be using microcomputers (Hart and Garrett, 1985a), send many foreign language teachers into a state of technological shock. To overcome this fear of technology, teachers need hands-on experience with computers through inservice and courses. Since it is unrealistic to expect every foreign language teacher in the country to become an expert programmer, efforts should concentrate on effective use of software, as well as systematic evaluation of available programs. It is therefore advisable

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for the foreign language teacher to take a good look at the various types of computer programs available, the possible uses and examples of each type in the foreign language classroom, and the cost-effectiveness factor involved in the selection of foreign language software.

Types of Computer Programs

There are basically five types of computer programs for educational purposes. The first type is "drill and practice," and involves simple typing in of answers, which are subsequently reinforced. This type of program is often referred to as nothing more than an electronic workbook, which does not take advantage of the more powerful capabilities of the computer (Meredith, 1983). The second type of program is the "tutorial." The "tutorial" actually presents new material to the student, gives examples, and provides opportunities for practice. The third type of program is called "simulation," requiring the student to interpret data and change variables to make decisions, which in turn are analyzed by the computer. The fourth, and most popular program, is the "computer game," ranging from HANGMAN to SOCCER. Finally, the fifth type of program is the "problem solver," which is a linguistic data base that helps students answer any variety of lexical or grammatical questions (Thrush and Thrush, 1981).

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Possible Uses and Examples of Each Type of Program

"Drill and Practice"

With the current emphasis on accountability, and raising of achievement scores, it is understandable that many of the "drill and practice" type programs have found their way into foreign language classrooms. Although these programs often do not take advantage of the more sophisticated capabilities of the computer, they are useful in that they force students to learn to spell correctly. While a tolerant teacher may give partial credit for a slightly misspelled word, computer programs of this nature insist on totally correct answers. With recent strong emphasis on oral communication skills in the foreign language classroom, writing skills have been somewhat neglected. An example of the "drill and practice" type program is the TENSES COMPUTER PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS OF FRENCH, used at the University of Waikato (Collett, 1982).

This program involves fill-in-the-blank type exercises, in which students choose a tense, and are then given an infinitive to conjugate. Correct answers are reinforced with "an encouraging remark (chosen at random from a set);" while incorrect answers elicit a "no, your answer should have been _____." At the end of each section, the student receives a score, indicating the percentage of correct answers (Collett, 1982). Another

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example of the "drill and practice" type program is FRELEM, a supplemental and voluntary program used in French at The University of Iowa, assisting students with many written elementary foreign language objectives (Hope, 1982). The program is a "drill instructor," and is, according to Hope, welcomed by students. In fact, a survey indicates that the reaction of many students at first was to laugh (Hope, 1982). A review of current foreign language catalogs reveals that there are numerous programs of this type to choose from (e.g. PRESENT TENSE OF REGULAR FRENCH VERBS, Gessler; FRENCH WORD ORDER, Gessler; SPANISH ACHIEVEMENT, Gessler; SPANISH ACHIEVEMENT, Weston Walch; VOCABULARY BUILDING IN SPANISH, OSEZ; VOCABULARY MASTER, Applause). Clearly, the "drill and practice" type computer programs are limited in their use, since the student must have relatively good command of the subject matter to be worked on in order to avoid frustration.

"Tutorial"

The second type of program, the "tutorials," do introduce new material, while also providing examples and opportunities for practice. The clear advantage in the latter program is that the "tutorial" can be used independently by the student. The "tutorial" is not used as extensively as one would assume in the foreign language classroom, however, perhaps due to its more complex nature. A typical Computer-Assisted Instruction Program (CAI), such as PLATO,

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ELSE, MONIQUE, or TECU/TUCO is nothing more than "drill and practice," although some of the users and advocates of these programs would like us to believe otherwise. PLATO, for example, cannot be used as an independent study tool, unless "the material is studied by the student prior to working on PLATO" (Scanlan, 1980).

There are , however, genuine foreign language "tutorials" on the market. The majority of these deal with cultural topics rather than with grammar, which perhaps indicates the more supplemental usage of this type of program. An example of a cultural "tutorial" program is GERMAN COOKING: FOODS AND WINES, by OSEZ, which introduces students to various types of German cuisine, without expecting the student to have prior knowledge of the subject matter. Accordingly, a foreign language teacher could assign the completion of such a program by a certain deadline, and subsequently discuss the subject in class.

Another example of a "tutorial"is HOW TO PLAY SOCCER: ?CÓMO JUGAR AL FÚTBOL?, by OSEZ, teaching students the rules of the game, in addition to an ambitious set of 450 new vocabulary words. D.C. Heath and Company is offering a series of six thematic beginning French software programs for the coming school year, ranging from sports to vacations. These programs introduce new vocabulary and grammatical structures

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in addition to drills and practice.

It is conceivable, of course, that teachers may write their own "tutorials," as part of make-up work or regular instruction. Authoring languages like SUPER PILOT, by APPLE, can be mastered in just a few hours of instruction. SUPER PILOT is based on PASCAL, and requires the knowledge of only 15 commands. University of Tennessee education students with no prior programming experience, have been able to produce fairly sophisticated "tutorials," with graphics and sound in only five weeks of summer school. LANGUAGE STUDY CENTER, by Teach Yourself by Computer Software, contains an even easier to use "mini-authoring" language program, allowing the teacher to write any number of personalized new lessons, including questions and answers, as well as reinforcements, following a prescribed format (Hart and Garrett, 1985 b).

Harry Grover Tuttle's claim that many foreign language teachers are learning to program in BASIC (Tuttle, 1983), seems rather far-fetched, considering the great amount of time it takes to write a good program. Yet, the use of the above authoring languages should cut programming time down to become a reasonable alternative to commercially-prepared software.

"Simulation"

The third type of computer program, "simulation," is even more complex than the "tutorial," requiring the

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student to interpret data and change certain variables to make decisions which carry a consequence of some nature. An example of this program is a "computer environment" package, GRANVILLE, currently produced by MEP at Homerton College, Cambridge, in which the student goes on an imaginary trip to Granville, in Normandy (Jones, 1985). The student must manage a budget for a fixed number of days, as s(he) goes to eat, shop, sight-seeing, etc. If the student forgets a meal, "a reminder is flashed up on the screen" (Jones, 1985). At any time the student may check on his/her financial status. This type of "simulation" program should have great potential for the future as it clearly promotes thinking and decision-making in the foreign language; this is a skill that is generally regarded as extremely difficult to obtain in foreign language instruction. A review of current foreign language catalogs reveals that only very few of these types of programs are currently available.

"Computer Game"

"Computer games" are probably the most popular and easiest to use computer programs. They generally reinforce vocabulary and/or grammar skills in a humorous way, which may improve student attitudes toward foreign languages. The games are fairly inexpensive ($30-$50), but may vary in quality. The French HANGMAN game seems to be popular,

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although in the gory French version, the man is decapitated if the student fails to guess the word.

Another example of a "computer game" is CROSSWORD MAGIC, which allows the teacher to create his/her own professional crossword puzzles with graphics. This package is produced by Gessler. Applause offers a graded series of computer software which instructs language concepts that are subsequently reinforced with games. A program called "Super Toe," for example, teaches the passé composé.

"Problem Solver"

Finally, the fifth type of computer program is the "problem solver." This type of program is still in an early developmental stage, much like "simulations." The "problem solver" serves as a linguistic data base, answering any variety of linguistic questions. Even though there may be "problem solvers" in many other disciplines, at this writing, there is but one good program for the foreign language classroom, THE LINGUIST, by Gessler, which can be used as an electronic dictionary in 20 different languages.

The Cost-Effectiveness Factor in Foreign Language Software Selection

With five distinctly different types of foreign language

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software on the market, the decision of which type to choose or emphasize is anything but trivial, in light of the cost-effectiveness factor involved in the selection. The hardware purchased largely determines the kind of software that can potentially be acquired. Most of the software currently offered (and described in this paper), can be used on Apple computers, but some is also available for the TRS-80, Commodore 64, Atari, and IBM PC/PCjr computers.

Currently, a thirty-station Apple computer system would cost about $54,000, even at the educational discount price (Eastern Computers, Knoxville, Tennessee). A single station can be purchased for under $2,000. Obviously, the particular needs of a school must be carefully considered before investing such a large amount of money. The software also can become rather costly and must be carefully selected. Prices range from $30 to several hundred, depending on length and quality of the program. The LANGUAGE STUDY CENTER discussed above, for example, costs $79.95, while the SUPER PILOT package is $160 (Eastern Computers, Knoxville, Tennessee).

A foreign language teacher might be tempted by the cost of a program rather than by its capabilities and usage for the classroom. However, another consideration in the selection of foreign language software is how many students will benefit from the program. The LANGUAGE STUDY CENTER, for example,

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could only be used by foreign language students, while the SUPER PILOT program could benefit the entire school. The decision would also depend on the teachers' skill to utilize this kind of software. The LANGUAGE STUDY CENTER would be much easier to use by inexperienced programmers, for example, but, of course does not offer as much versatility in terms of design, graphics, and sound, as the SUPER PILOT program.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the major types of educational software currently on the market: (1)"drill and practice;" (2)"tutorials;" (3)simulations;" (4)"computer games;" and, (5)"problem solvers." Possible uses for each type of program along with examples were given. Finally, the cost-effectiveness factor in the selection of foreign language software was considered.

Like it or not, computers are here to stay and can no longer be ignored as "fads or frills" that will soon fade away. The foreign language teacher of the 1980's must take a look at what is on the market. Even if the likelihood of a computer in every classroom in the United States seems remote, a classroom teacher must be literate in current computer

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terminology, and have at least some concept of what is happening in terms of new technology.

It was not the intended purpose of this paper to make futuristic projections of sophisticated language labs, as described by Meredith (1983). It was rather to cause the language teacher, who is reluctantly facing a generation of "whiz kids" in his/her classroom, not to give up yet, and to look into the future, searching for realistic ways to use the computer to improve foreign language instruction.

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